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AUTHOR Garner, W. Harold; Shapton, Karen
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ABSTRACT

A marketing study was conducted in the Sauk Valley College (SVC) Illinois district. This public comprehensive community college conducted a survey to determine public perceptions of the scope and quality of its programs; extent of public involvement with SVC; prospective market for SVC; and primary information sources used by the public concerning SVC. The "attentive public" model proposed by Gabriel Almond in 1950 was used in the analysis of survey results. The results of the survey indicated a positive assessment of the quality of college programs, missions, and program objectives. The results of the survey provided useful information for planning curriculum program and communication strategies. The study will be used to develop marketing strategies and to communicate with the public. (DWH)

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PUBLIC EVALUATION OF A COMMUNITY COLLEGE

by:

W. Harold Garner, President

Karen Shapton, Director of Planning and Resource Development

Sauk Valley College

R. R. #5

Dixon, IL 61021

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Sauk Valley College, Dixon, Illinois

Sauk Valley College is a public comprehensive community college located in northwestern Illinois. The region served by the college includes portions of six counties and includes approximately 1,466 square miles with a population of 109,147. 39% of the population is concentrated in the three cities of Dixon, Sterling and Rock Falls with the remainder residing in small towns, villages, and rural areas throughout the region. The three major aspects of the area economy are agriculture, steel production, and light manufacturing predominately in the area of auto accessories and hardware.

The college offers a wide spectrum of programs including transfer programs to prepare students to go on to a four university, career programs to prepare students to enter into the job market, develop mental/remedial programs to help students develop basic skills, and a broad community service program offering instruction at various sites in the district and offering cultural events and other activities at the college. Approximately 3,500 students enroll in one of these programs each semester. The nearest universities are all at least 55 miles distant from the college and include Northern Illinois University, Rockford College and Marycrest College. The college has a unique roll in postsecondary education in the region it serves.

Sauk, like many other educational institutions, assesses it

success both formally and informally. Formal measures include tracking the success of our graduates at four year institutions or in the job market. On both these measures Sauk students do extremely well. Informally we listen to those members of the community with whom we have an opportunity to interact. However, this method brings us only into contact with a limited segment of the population of our district which is not representative of the district as a whole. We, like so many other educational institutions, think we know what our public thinks of us. However in our 20 year history we had never really asked them in a systematic manner.

Higher education is faced with a number of unusual pressures. First, the pool of traditional college age students is declining. In order to maintain enrollment to keep an institution viable new markets must be sought. Second, the institution must seek to meet the needs and challenges of the community as these needs change over time. Third, an institution must communicate with its publics in an evermore sophisticated fashion in order to be heard above the den of the other communications that are received by an individual each day. Marketing has become a high priority among most educational institutions.

Recognizing these challenges Sauk Valley College sought both funding and professional assistance to conduct a true marketing study of the citizens of our district. In October, 1983 the Public Opinion Research Laboratory at Northern Illinois University was asked to design and conduct a survey of the citizens in the district served by Sauk Valley College. The research was funded H.E.A. Title III Planning Grant Sauk received for FY 1983. The purposes of this survey were to ascertain:

1. Public perceptions of the scope and quality of Sauk Valley College programs

2. The extent of public involvement with Sauk Valley College

3. The prospective market for Sauk Valley College

4. The primary information sources used by the public concerning Sauk Valley College

Public Opinion Research Laboratory conducted telephone interviews with 502 district residents over the age of 18. The proportional sample was based on the number of residential phone numbers in service in each community in the district. The random digit procedure was used to actually select the sample once the proportions were known. Within each household one respondent was selected randomly by computer.

In their analysis of the survey results, Ellen Dran and Jon Miller (1983) applied the attentive public model proposed by Gabriel Almond in 1950. Given a large number of policy issues most people will limit their area of interest and competence to only a few. They will select these areas according to their interest and involvement with the issues. The attentive public for an issue are those persons who are both interested in and well informed about an issue.

Based on this model a number of questions in the survey measures the level of interest in the college and the respondents' self-perceived level of knowledge about the college. The respondents were then divided into three categories:

1. Attentive public - both interested and well informed.

2. Interested public - interested but not well informed.

3. Nonattentive public - neither interested nor well informed.

Table 1 on the next page shows the distribution of the sample

among these categories. It is noteworthy that women are more likely to be in the interested public than men of the same ages. Younger people age 18-34 were less likely to be in the interested public than other age groups.

TABLE 1

Attentiveness to Sauk Valley College: Age and Gender

Gender	Age	Attentive Public	Interested Public	Nonattentive Public	N
Male	18 - 34	6%	12%	82%	72
	35 - 54	7	20	73	83
	55 plus	4	22	74	46
All males		6	18	76	201
Female	18 - 34	7	16	77	92
	35 - 54	6	29	65	99
	55 plus	7	33	60	110
All females		7	27	67	301
Total		6	23	71	502

An Index of Involvement was created to further analyze the nature of the relationship of these three publics to the college. The respondents scored points on six measures of involvement ranging from being a current or former student to attending special events at Sauk. The Index of Involvement was correlated to the three previously identified publics. The results are in Table 2 on the next page.

The analysis shows that 93% of the attentive public is involved with Sauk Valley College in some way. 59% of the attentive public scored 3 or more on the Index of Involvement. Three-quarters of the

interested public is involved with the college but 43% of the nonattentive public has had no involvement. It is clear that those people who use the college in some way or have relatives who have used the college care the most about Sauk. These are the people who have more of a stake in the college and are most likely to respond to programs, services, and requests for public support.

TABLE 2

Index of Involvement with Sauk Valley College

Index of Involvement	Attentive Public	Interested Public	Nonattentive Public	Total Public
0	7%	26%	43%	37%
1	15	16	26	23
2	19	29	18	21
3	34	21	9	13
4	22	7	4	6
5	0	1	1	1
6	3	0	0	*
N =	32	116	354	502

* = less than 1%

One important objective of the study was to measure the public's perceptions of the overall quality of Sauk Valley College. Respondents were asked to assign a letter grade to the college, to local elementary and high schools, and to several universities which are the major alternatives to postsecondary education in the area.

Table 3 on the next page displays the results of this quality evaluation.

TABLE 3

Quality of Schools Expressed As a Grade Point Average

School	GPA given by: Attentive Public	Interested Public	Nonattentive Public	Total Public
Local elementary	3.10 (29)	3.11 (95)	3.02 (290)	3.05 (415)
Local high school	2.59 (27)	2.83 (99)	2.86 (303)	2.84 (430)
Sauk Valley College	3.24 (29)	3.46 (101)	3.05 (265)	3.17 (396)
Norther Ill. Univ.	3.55 (20)	3.59 (69)	3.40 (173)	3.46 (262)
Illinois State Univ.	3.32 (19)	3.35 (51)	3.30 (171)	3.31 (241)
Western Ill. Univ.	3.12 (17)	3.15 (61)	3.05 (147)	3.08 (224)

GPA based on A=4, B=3, C=2, D=1, F=0
( ) = Number who expressed an opinion

Sauk received high grades even in comparison to the universities. It is noteworthy that the interested public gave Sauk its highest rating. This is the group of persons who are very interested in the college but do not consider themselves very well informed about it.

Beyond this general measure of quality respondents who were asked to rate several program objectives or missions of the college in terms of importance and then were asked to grade each one of these objectives or missions using a letter grade format. The results appear in Table 4 on the next page.

TABLE 4

GPA Scores for Programs and Services at Sauk Valley College

Program or Service	Attentive Public		Interested Public		Nonattentive Public	
	% Think Important	GPA	% Think Important	GPA	% Think Important	GPA
Transfer to 4-year school	78%	3.42	93%	3.35	76%	3.04
Job preparation	75	3.35	88	3.27	73	3.04
Help unemployed	56	2.67	67	2.84	66	2.62
GED and basic adult education	53	3.56	74	3.47	69	3.46
Career counseling	53	3.20	74	3.09	62	2.94
Training for area business	53	3.21	65	3.22	63	3.10
Update skills	50	3.29	65	3.34	49	3.03
Job placement	47	3.23	68	3.07	56	2.80
Enrichment courses	47	3.29	46	3.58	34	3.26
Cultural events	41	3.17	33	3.55	25	3.15
Help local business	34	3.44	42	3.21	35	2.76
Cumulative GPA		3.26		3.27		3.02
N =	32		116		354	

Note: GPA computed for those who think a program or service is very important and who assigned a grade to Sauk Valley College for that program or service.

Three-quarters or more of all three publics rated preparation for transfer to a four year school and job preparation as important functions. It is again noteworthy that the interested public on a percentage basis gave higher importance ratings to many of these program objectives and missions than either the attentive or nonattentive publics.

The cumulative grade point average from all three publics was better than a B. But the cumulative assessment by the nonattentive

public was significantly lower. The nonattentive public seems to be especially displeased with practical, job oriented functions such as help for local business, job placement career counseling and helping with the unemployed.

A third measure of public perception was to ask about specific opinions. Respondents were read a series of statements about Sauk and asked if they agreed or disagreed. Table 5 below summarize the results of this measure.

TABLE 5

Opinions about Sauk Valley College

Opinion	Attentive Public	Interested Public	Nonattentive Public	Total Public
Sauk students get good jobs:				
Disagree	21%	13%	18%	17%
Uncertain	19	38	51	46
Agree	60	49	31	37
Sauk students succees at 4-year schools:				
Disagree	3	3	7	6
Uncertain	3	34	45	40
Agree	94	63	49	55
SVC should offer more career counseling:				
Disagree	16	10	11	11
Uncertain	10	43	48	44
Agree	75	47	41	45
SVC offers too many frivolous courses:				
Disagree	61	54	34	41
Uncertain	16	30	44	39
Agree	24	16	22	21
SVC is responsive to wants of area people:				
Disagree	6	4	7	7
Uncertain	6	11	25	21
Agree	88	84	68	73
N =	32	116	354	502

The attentive public appears to hold firm and positive attitudes toward Sauk. Predictably the level of agreement declines in the interested public and further declines in the nonattentive public. A significant portion of the nonattentive public either holds no attitudes or negative attitudes about Sauk.

Overall, Sauk received a very positive assessment of the quality of its programs, its missions and its program objectives. The information gained from this phase of the study will be valuable in helping to establish priorities. And in determining strategies to more effectively communicate with those publics that comprise the nonattentives in order to help make them more aware of Sauk's programs and services.

The third survey objective focused on determining the current and prospective market for Sauk in the district. Respondents were asked about future plans in terms of taking courses working for a degree and were also asked to identify the specific field they were interested in.

A fifth of the sample indicated that they plan to take some college courses at Sauk Valley College in the next two years and about a third of these plan to be working for a degree. The data revealed that women age 35-54 are about as likely to be planning to take college courses at Sauk as our younger women or younger men age 18-34 and twice as likely as men of their own age. This information reflects a national trend toward women returning to education and the work force between the ages of 35 and 54. It is significant in terms of our own marketing processes to begin to gear communications directly at this target group and to develop support services to

assist this target during the educational process. To this end, a center for returning adults primarily women was established at the college in the Fall of 1984. This center provides counseling, morale support, and a comfortable place for reentering adults to come and have coffee and discuss the problems this nontraditional student group faces.

The subject areas college bound respondents indicated a primary interest were business, industrial/technical, and health physical education. 59% of the respondents planning to take courses at Sauk are doing so for job or skill related reasons and an additional 33% for personal reasons. This information too reflects trends in the world of work and also reflects the poor economy of the region. Area residents are seeking to find new jobs or to upgrade themselves in the jobs they already have.

The fourth objective of the study was to determine how the public acquires its information about Sauk Valley College. The results appear in Table 6 below.

TABLE 6

First Source of Information about Sauk Valley College

Source	Attentive Public	Interested Public	Nonattentive Public	Total Public
SVC publications	25%	37%	37%	36%
Newspaper	29	20	35	31
Other people	21	28	16	19
Personal experience	19	6	3	4
Radio	0	8	3	4
Other	6	1	1	2
Don't know	0	1	5	4
N =	32	116	354	502

Sauk publications, newspapers and other people were the primary sources of information for all three publics. The attentive public which tends to be more print oriented uses print sources more than any other source of information. The interested public while getting much information from SVC publications relies more than attentives or nonattentives on other people or word of mouth knowledge. This may help to explain the lower level of self perceived knowledge about the college.

Although radio does not seem to be important as an information source it should not be ignored as a potential channel of information. A large percentage - 26% - gave one local radio station as the primary station listened to the most. This is more than twice of what the other two local radio stations receive as a market share. Radio is most appropriately used as a quick reminder source for an important event such as registration. Potentially it can be used more effectively for news stories about the college and interviews with college personnel. The interested and nonattentive publics tend to use radio as an information source more heavily than the attentives and this may be one channel of communication that would be more effective with these two publics.

The results of this survey have been both gratifying and useful in planning curriculum program and communication strategies. Sauk is clearly highly regarded by the community. The nonattentive public is quite large some 71% of the total population age 18 years or older. It is to this public that we must direct some attention in order to shift more of them into the interested and/or attentive categories.

The interested public as well must be kept better informed of events, activities, programs and services of the college.

The concepts and information developed from this study were extremely useful in planning a strategy that eventually resulted in the successful passage of a tax levy increase in November of 1984. Attention was focused on mobilizing the support of the attentive and interested publics and through a citizens committee of more than 1,000 persons informing many who would be in the nonattentive group.

Data from the survey must be analyzed further in order to identify specific target groups within each of the publics with specific opinions about quality or desired programs and services. We believe that the study will be useful for several years to come in developing marketing strategies and communicating with our publics. The fundamental assumption is that in order to effectively serve and communicate with your publics you must listen to them first. A study such as this one provides a means for listening to your public.